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SUBJECT: DENEHY TALKS TO BA'ATHIST REFORMER AND MODERATE
ISLAMIC LEADERS ON CIVIL SOCIETY

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: As part of his December 2-10 round of discussions, NEA senior advisor David Denehy, accompanied by PolChief, spoke with Ba'athist reform figure Ayman Abdul Noor and with two moderate Islamic leaders, Abu Noor Institute Director Salah Kuftaro, and MP Mohammed Habash (other conversations reported septel). Abdul Noor provided some basic data on the number and size of licensed NGO's and noted the problems involved in funneling USG support to licensed and unlicensed NGO's in Syria. He noted that he would provide Denehy with a written plan of action for boosting USG support for civil society in Syria and noted that he would be in Washington in mid-January. Two moderate Islamic leaders separately told Denehy that USG efforts to dramatically increase support for Syrian civil society would not succeed unless the U.S. first adopted a more even-handed approach on -- and helped resolve -- the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Denehy did not have the opportunity to clear this message before departing post. End Summary.

¶2. (C) BASIC DATA ON NGO'S IN SYRIA: Ayman Abdul Noor, Ba'athist reformer and SARG critic, told NEA senior advisor Denehy December 2 that there are some 600 licensed NGO's in Syria. A substantial number of them are what Abdul Noor referred to as GNGO's, or government-sponsored NGO's. They could be recognized as such because of the prominent SARG or Ba'ath Party names usually associated with them. Of the remainder, approximately 280 are charitable organizations, 20-25 of them Christian, and the rest Islamic. Other NGO's focused on cultural activities, health, the environment, and youth and student activities. The vast majority of the NGO's function in only four (out of 14) governorates in Syria: Damascus, rural Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs. Some 150 NGO's have licenses from the SARG, often dating back for years, but have become inactive.

¶3. (C) According to Abdul Noor, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor licenses NGO's and provides USD 500-1000 each year in assistance to many of them. Except for a handful of heavily endowed Muslim NGO's, most of the groups have small budgets of less than USD 20,000. A few with official SARG support, like the Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association (SYEA), operate with "off-budget" funding and are able to tap into the "unofficial" fundraising capabilities of people like First Lady Asma al-Asad, who obtained, for example a USD 500,000 gift for SYEA from a prominent Gulf-based donor, reported Abdul Noor.

¶4. (C) HOW THE U.S. CAN INCREASE ITS SUPPORT: If the U.S. is interested in supporting "the real civil society" in Syria, then it must find ways to support unlicensed NGO's,

said Abdul Noor. Such groups exist but their capacity to absorb funding is limited, depending on their size and maturity. The USG needs to design a two-track approach. The first track would be transparent and involve non-controversial support for Syrian civil society, in cooperation with the SARG, the universities, and other such entities. The second, quieter track should be organized out of a regional office in Dubai that would design projects, and handle logistics and correspondence. The SARG will only see the final results in country but would not be able to follow the process or funding. Abdul Noor acknowledged that the SARG had laws and regulations that it used to prevent external funding for such groups, but insisted that he knew how to get around these prohibitions.

15. (C) WHERE TO START: Abdul Noor suggested that initially the USG should quietly do a survey of NGO's to gather more precise data (and hinted strongly that he was the person capable of performing this task), and then develop an action plan to identify where money is needed and what projects are necessary. Denehy welcomed Abdul Noor's proposal to put his ideas in writing and discuss them in more detail during his projected mid-January visit to Washington.

16. (C) MODERATE ISLAMISTS WEIGH IN: Moderate Islamic leaders Salah Kuftaro, the head of Abu Noor Institute, and Mohammed Habash, moderate Islamist MP and the head of the Islamic Studies Center in Damascus, told Denehy in separate meetings December 5 that USG efforts to dramatically step up funding and support for civil society in Syria would fail unless the U.S. adopted a more even-handed approach on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and took steps to help resolve it. According to Kuftaro, the U.S. at present does not have the credibility to sustain such a project. "Nobody in the region believes the U.S. wants to increase democracy in this part of the world. If we don't handle the problem of the occupied territories and the Golan, everything will be a waste of time," said Kuftaro. Nonetheless, Kuftaro welcomed U.S. NGO's visiting Syria to work with his Abu Noor Institute on projects of common interest. Habash made similar points but emphasized repeatedly that if the U.S. wanted to strengthen civil society in Syria, it would have to engage with the SARG. Otherwise the effort would put civil society activists at risk and would not succeed.

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